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Letter dated 16 April 2018 from the Chair of the Burundi configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission addressed to the President of the Security Council

On behalf of the Burundi configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, I am transmitting herewith a report on my visit to Burundi from 27 to 30 March 2018 (see annex).

I would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated to the members of the Security Council and issued as a document of the Council.

I look forward to the continued cooperation between the Security Council and the Peacebuilding Commission on Burundi.

(*Signed*) Jürg **Lauber**
Chair of the Burundi configuration
of the Peacebuilding Commission

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Annex to the letter dated 16 April 2018 from the Chair of the Burundi configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission addressed to the President of the Security Council

My sixth visit to Burundi in my capacity as Chair of the Burundi configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission took place from 27 to 30 March 2018. In my meetings, I focused on the subjects that I had presented to the configuration on 29 January, namely, the East African Community-led dialogue process, the path towards the elections in 2020, the socioeconomic situation and the humanitarian challenges, as well as reconciliation.

The main objectives of my visit were to get a first-hand impression of the situation on the ground, to maintain contact with the Government and other national stakeholders, to advocate renewed dialogue and cooperation between the Government and its international partners and to identify further avenues for the engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission with Burundi.

I would like to start by thanking the Government of Burundi, the United Nations Resident Coordinator, Garry Conille, the United Nations country team, the Swiss Cooperation Office in Bujumbura and the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in New York for preparing a very rich and insightful programme.

The Deputy and Political Director of the Peacebuilding Support Office, Barrie Freeman, travelled with me.

Particular thanks go to the Permanent Representative of Burundi, Albert Shingiro, who accompanied me, as on previous missions.

1. Programme of the visit

In Burundi, I was received by the President of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza; the Minister of External Relations and International Cooperation, Alain Aimé Nyamitwe; the Minister of Finance, Budget and Privatization, Domitien Ndihokubwayo; the President of the National Independent Electoral Commission, Pierre Claver Ndayicariye; the President of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Jean Louis Nahimana; leaders of three political parties (Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie, Amizero y'Abarundi and Union pour le progrès national); the Special Representative of the African Union for the Great Lakes Region and Head of the African Union Liaison Office in Burundi, Basile Ikouébé; representatives of the private sector; the United Nations country team; members of the team of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Burundi, Michel Kafando; the International Committee of the Red Cross; and representatives of States members of the configuration (Belgium, China, France, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, the United States of America and the European Union), as well as a group of economists and historians.

Two initially planned meetings, with political parties and with civil society organizations, did not take place, but I am planning to meet these interlocutors during my next visit to Burundi.

2. Political situation

After three days in Bujumbura, I spent one day in the city of Ngozi, where I was received by the President of Burundi. The two cities that I visited during my mission to the country made a lively impression on me, and the general security situation seemed calm.

On 28 March, I met with the National Independent Electoral Commission, which is in charge of preparing the upcoming referendum and the elections of 2020. The President of the Commission explained how the Commission was finalizing the registration of voters for the referendum scheduled for 17 May 2018 and for the elections of 2020. On 12 December 2017, the Government had launched an "explanation campaign" regarding the referendum, whereas the political campaign itself would last from 1 to 14 May. Government officials stressed that the proposed constitutional amendments were fully compatible with the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi. In my contacts with the Government, I underlined that the referendum must take place in a democratic and open environment and without any incidents.

I also invited the Government to reflect about whether Burundi might require international electoral assistance for the elections of 2020.

The leaders of three political parties with whom I met on 29 March suggested that the political actors of Burundi should agree on a road map that would define the path towards the elections in 2020.

Such a road map could contain a number of benchmarks aimed at ensuring that the elections would be free, fair, transparent, peaceful and fully inclusive and include the participation of all political parties. The party leaders also reiterated their continued commitment to participate in the East African Community-led dialogue process.

Many interlocutors expressed similar support for the mediation by the East African Community and the hope that the next round of the inter-Burundi dialogue would take place in Uganda in late April, as planned. The Special Representative of the African Union and the team of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General underlined their willingness to continue to support the efforts of the Community.

Various interlocutors emphasized that the Government should swiftly reach an agreement with the African Union on the deployment of the agreed number of human rights and military observers and with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the full resumption of its activities.

3. Socioeconomic situation and humanitarian challenges

The serious socioeconomic challenges that Burundi is currently facing were a key subject of my conversations. According to the Minister of Finance, the gross domestic product (GDP) of Burundi grew by 2.8 per cent in 2017, while the inflation rate was 16 per cent. For 2018, the Government forecasts GDP growth of 4 per cent and a budget deficit of 3 per cent.

Government officials called upon the partners of Burundi to focus more on mid- and long-term socioeconomic development than on humanitarian assistance. They reiterated their regret about the suspension of direct budgetary assistance by the European Union in 2016, while at the same time expressing their appreciation for the continued engagement by the European Union and its member States in specific areas.

The Government also informed me that it was currently elaborating a new national development plan that would soon be published.

The international partners of Burundi reiterated their readiness to support Burundi with regard to both socioeconomic and humanitarian challenges. They expressed their wish to be informed about the national development plan as early as possible in order to adapt their development strategies to national priorities. The United Nations country team pointed to the relevance of the national development

plan to the elaboration of the next United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

The country's international partners, as well as representatives of the private sector, referred to certain challenges for economic engagement, including the lack of foreign currency and difficulties in obtaining bank loans.

In my conversation with the President of Burundi, I emphasized that the Burundi configuration remained committed to facilitating dialogue and cooperation between the Government and its international partners. In that regard, I suggested that another round of socioeconomic consultations be organized in Bujumbura in 2018, which could involve additional partners such as the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and bilateral donors. The national development plan of Burundi might serve as a basis for such a conversation between the Government and its partners.

The President thanked the configuration for its continued cooperation with Burundi and expressed his interest in another round of the socioeconomic dialogue, including with additional partners. He also indicated that the national development plan would be "realistic and pragmatic".

During my stay, high-ranking officials from Burundi, the United Republic of Tanzania and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed a tripartite agreement on the return of additional Burundian refugees from the United Republic of Tanzania. According to UNHCR, a total of 274,455 Burundian refugees are currently living in the United Republic of Tanzania. Priority for repatriation will be given to 19,148 refugees whose registered intention to return has already been verified by UNHCR. The total number of returnees might reach 72,000 in 2018. I encouraged the Government to continue its cooperation with UNHCR on repatriation, in full respect for the principles of international refugee law and in the interest of enabling the conflict-sensitive reintegration of returnees.

With regard to the humanitarian response plan for 2018, the Government repeated its view that the plan contained exaggerated numbers and had not been sufficiently consulted upon with national authorities. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had launched the plan in February 2018. Only 2 per cent of its total budget of $141.8 million was currently covered. I told the Government and its humanitarian partners that a swift agreement on the humanitarian response plan would allow them to mobilize additional resources, and I offered the Burundi configuration as a platform for generating broad support for the plan.

I was pleased to hear that the Peacebuilding Fund had pledged up to $8 million for peacebuilding programming in Burundi in 2018.

4. Reconciliation

Since the President of Burundi had always underlined the importance of national reconciliation at previous meetings, I raised this question again when we met on 30 March. Two days earlier, I had met the President of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a group of local historians and reconciliation experts. I was impressed to hear about the work that the Commission had undertaken in recent months; so far, it has collected over 45,000 testimonies and engaged in 16 of the 18 provinces of Burundi. Among the challenges faced by the Commission were time pressure, data security and the question of accountability.

In my meeting with the President, I welcomed the progress made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I recommended extending the mandate of the Commission by one year, until the end of 2019, in accordance with the provisions of the Arusha Accords. I also indicated that the Burundi configuration could help

mobilize international technical and financial assistance for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as for other reconciliation efforts in Burundi. The President reacted positively to the suggestion of an extension of the mandate and said that he would welcome increased international assistance for the Commission, whose work he called "a key for the future of Burundi".

5. Conclusions

Based on my conversations in Burundi, my recommendations to the Burundi configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission are the following:

1. The international community should continue to follow developments in Burundi attentively and take all aspects of the current situation into account. In doing so, there is a need for coherence among United Nations actors and the international community, and for finding common ground with the Government in order to build trust and a better sense of partnership.

2. The mediation efforts by the East African Community continue to deserve our full support.

3. The next national development plan may offer a basis for a renewed conversation between the Government and its international partners. I am therefore planning to organize another round of the socioeconomic dialogue between Burundi and its partners in 2018 in cooperation with the Government of Burundi and the United Nations Resident Coordinator. The involvement of partners such as the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and bilateral donors who did not participate in the Bujumbura round tables in 2017 seems crucial to me. In my view, such a dialogue session has a considerable potential to foster confidence between Burundi and its partners.

4. Besides mid- and long-term socioeconomic cooperation, the international community should not neglect the immediate humanitarian needs in Burundi. The Burundi configuration should continue to encourage cooperation between the Government and its humanitarian partners with a view to addressing the most urgent needs of the population.

5. The significant gains achieved through the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi must not be undermined. One of the advantages of a road map to 2020 for political actors is that it could potentially yield a broadly shared understanding on how the gains achieved in Arusha can be preserved, namely, with a view to the elections of 2020.

6. The international community should continue to support efforts of national reconciliation and follow the ongoing reconciliation process in Burundi attentively.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members of the Burundi configuration for their continuous support.